

Engineering Civil Society in Africa

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Introduction

“Civil society” has become an important term within the discourse and practice of contemporary development.¹ In this chapter we examine attempts by Western states and development agencies to ‘support’ and ‘encourage’ civil society in two African states: Ghana and Sierra Leone. These cases, while very different, nonetheless exemplify some of the typical forms of interventions that target ‘civil society’ in African states. Our discussion of these interventions is informed by an understanding of the broad project of reform that western states and development agencies are attempting in most African states, which we have called, following Margaret Canovan, a liberal project (Canovan 1990; Young 2002; Williams 2008). This phrase seems to us to better capture the general character of liberalism, moving beyond understanding it as simply a body of theory (although it does, of course, take a theoretical form) to understanding it as a project of social transformation which informs the concrete practices of political agents. One form this project of transformation takes is a variety of strategies to ‘engineer’ civil society: to construct and reconstruct social groups and their relations with the state.

This account rests on a series of claims about the relationship between political concepts, categories and arguments and the activity of political agents, an account which is to be

distinguished from at least two other possibilities. Firstly, we reject the view that the activities of these agencies can be fully understood simply by reference to their 'interests' or the interests of powerful states. There are very significant difficulties with conceiving of an agency devoid of any 'ideas', even if it is only ideas about what is in one's interests, and why. If this is right the question is not 'do ideas matter?' but 'which ideas matter?' And this is an empirical question. Secondly our focus is narrower than one that explores the broad discursive structures that shape the activities of development agencies (Escobar 1995). Our understanding of liberalism as a project leads us to focus more precisely on the particular concepts, arguments, tensions and ambiguities found within it as a way of understanding the activities of contemporary development agencies.

In developing this account we first explore the place of civil society within liberal thought suggesting that its conceptual ambiguities are rooted in a fundamental tension between what might be called a 'liberation narrative' and a 'transformation narrative'; that is to say between creating the conditions for the flourishing of social groups and engineering such groups in the first place. We highlight three of these ambiguities: a tension between private interests and the public interest; concerns about which groups constitute civil society and the composition of those groups; and the relationship between civil society groups and the state, notably the idea of accountability. We suggest these ambiguities become more explicable when liberalism is viewed as a political project. We turn then to the discourses and practices of western agencies, reviewing the way in which the term 'civil society' emerged and its place within donor discourse, and suggesting that much of this discourse tracks the ways that liberal thought has conceptualized 'civil society'. Finally our case studies show how donor activities reflect the ambiguities of civil society as a concept as well as the broader political project of liberalism. In the conclusion we suggest some ways in which donors concerns with

civil society may be shifting.

Civil Society and the Liberal Project

Although we cannot attend to its complexities here it is worth noting that the virtually hegemonic contemporary definitions of civil society as associational life have tended to obscure the range of meanings and practices that liberalism has understood by the term. Both the idea of 'the market' and the 'public sphere' remain essential concepts in the way liberalism thinks about how free, equal and rational beings form and maintain social orders appropriate to their nature.² In all its various manifestations civil society has been understood to have a number of common features (Chambers and Kymlicka 2002). First it exemplifies liberal commitments to freedom and equality constituting an arena(s) within which individuals can pursue their own particular projects through freely associating with others. In this way civil society is a plural realm comprising a wide variety of groups pursuing a wide variety of ends. Second, as a space of free debate and criticism it provides a constraint on the power of the state. The expression of diverse views and opinions within civil society makes it possible to hold the state accountable, benefits the policy-making process and provides a bulwark against the 'tyranny of the majority'. Third, civil society is conceived of as a place for the cultivation of certain attitudes and virtues that are important for sustaining liberal social life. These include law-abidingness, cooperation, tolerance and self-reliance (Rosenblum 1989). These understandings shape the familiar liberal account of the relations between state, society, economy and individual in which individuals are free to pursue their economic and political aspirations and enabled both to cultivate the virtues that make such a society work, as well as ensure that the state, while carrying out necessary public functions, does not become oppressive or its agents corrupt.

Within this account there is however a tension between a liberation narrative in which civil society ‘emerges’ (because it is in a sense ‘already there’) from the removal of oppressive social structures, practices and ideas; and a transformation narrative in which civil society, far from being ‘there’, has to be both constructed and sustained. This tension characterises all the core Liberal concepts (notably ‘the individual’ and ‘the market’) and reflects the central ambiguity within liberal thought between ‘nature’ or ‘reason’, on the one hand and ‘culture’ or ‘society’ on the other: between liberating what is already there – given in human nature or reason – or constructing liberal ends and arrangements from the ground up as it were. This tension can be seen in many ways. It is manifest, for example, in the varied theoretical devices used in liberal thought to justify liberal ends and arrangements that ‘strip out’ the actual lived lives of people and groups to ‘discover’ their real nature. At the same time, however, liberal thought is replete with discussions about how influenced people actually are by ‘custom’, ‘trust’ and ‘interest’ (to use Locke’s terms: Locke 1993). In other words, people were very often not at all like the more abstract person used to justify liberal ends. Appeals to ‘nature’ or ‘reason’ might ground liberal arguments, but when it came to making liberal ends and arrangements real in the world, the actual lived lives of persons and groups would have to be remade.

Against this background a number of difficulties in liberal concepts of civil society can be identified. The first issue concerns how a sphere in which particular private interests are pursued through associational life can at the same time be a sphere where the public interest is advanced and protected. The key question here is the extent to which civil society can be relied upon to sustain a liberal order, or to what extent there must be other guarantees, in for example the legal system, that lie outside of civil society and importantly limit the scope of civil society action (Charney 1998). It might be noted that exactly parallel concerns animate

liberal discussions about both the economy (e.g. the reliance on hidden hand argument to secure the public interest) and the public sphere (e.g. debates about the forms that public discussion and democracy should take).

This fundamental dilemma poses two further difficulties. The first concerns the groups that constitute civil society. Liberal theory generally understands social forces in terms of organised social interests and encounters difficulties with groups organised on different socio-cognitive bases, such as race, tribe or religion. There are two aspects to this. One concerns groups that might threaten liberal ends and practices, and the other groups whose internal values and practices might be non-liberal (Kateb 1994; Chambers and Kopstein 2001). This latter issue prompts questions as to the degree to which the liberal state may require social groups have the right kind of characteristics of internal organisation and values that will allow a liberal social order to work. The second difficulty concerns relations between the state and civil society generally labeled 'accountability', that is to say to what extent may civil society constrain and make demands of the public power and through what mechanisms (lobbying, electioneering etc).

These tensions do not only merely reflect diversity within the liberal tradition, nor a failure of internal consistency, but rather the 'political project' at the heart of all liberal thought. The commitment to 'civil society' is genuine, in large part due to liberal anxieties about the power and scope of the state. But this commitment is hedged around by others, to certain kinds of market arrangements or individual rights for example, which suggest that what is really being advocated or defended is a particular kind of associational life relating in particular kinds of ways to the state. 'Civil society' is then at least in part a constructed realm as certain kinds of associational life are to be reworked or even eliminated, and other forms encouraged. Finally

it implies that ‘civil society’ can play an important part in shaping the attitudes, mores and self-understanding of individuals who are to be encouraged to conceive of themselves and their relations with others and the state in particular kinds of ways. All of this, we suggest, is visible in the discourse and practice of western states and development agencies in their relations with African states.

Development and ‘Civil Society’

Despite the importance of some notion of civil society within liberal thought its political deployment has of course varied with time and political circumstance. ‘Civil society’ first emerged within the policies of western development agencies in the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of the broader ideas of ‘good governance’ and ‘democracy promotion’. Almost all major Western donors and development agencies have embraced the language of civil society (Williams 2011: chap 7). The World Bank has argued that a strong civil society participating in public affairs is an essential component of good governance (World Bank 1994a). USAID has emphasized the importance of civil society in creating a democratic culture and particularly its role as a ‘counterbalance to the exercise of excessive authority by governments and economic and political elites’ (USAID 2009). DfID has stressed the role of civil society in enabling poor and marginalized groups to participate in decision-making and the role of civil society in providing goods and services to the poor (DfID nd). The liberal logic of the donor arguments is clear. In order for the state to provide the institutional and macroeconomic environment necessary for ‘development’ it must be made accountable for its actions. The state’s activities, then must be made as transparent as possible through the provision of information, a free press and public debate, and ‘civil society’ groups must be ‘empowered’ so that they can play a key role in pressuring the state for better performance. ‘Aware that they are being monitored by citizen groups, public officials know that they may

be held accountable for budget discrepancies or failure to deliver adequate services' (World Bank 2006a: vi).

But donor discourse (and as we shall see practice) also reflects the ambiguities and tensions in the liberal understandings of 'civil society'. There is a concern about whether civil society groups actually have the skills to enable them to hold governments to account: 'the effectiveness of many initiatives is impaired by civil society's lack of technical expertise in financial management and budgetary analysis' (World Bank 2006: vii). This animates much of the concern with 'capacity building' for civil society. There is also a concern with limiting the scope of civil society: 'in some spheres ... there can be little compromise. Family and ethnic ties that strengthen communal actions have no place in central government agencies where staff must be selected on merit, and public and private monies must not be confused' (World Bank 1989: 60). As Pierre Landell-Mills (1992: 545) argued in a wonderfully clear articulation of the liberal project, 'the challenge is to build on the elements that are compatible with modernization and development, [and reject] those that are not'.

While these generalizations hold, political practice never simply follows some theoretical template as the term 'liberal project' reminds us. Even in liberal politics broadly defined there are strategic and tactical calculations to be made, goals and policies to be formulated and outcomes to be anticipated and assessed. The West and its agencies have not blindly pursued a 'one-size-fits-all' policy in relation to civil society questions, nor are they anything like as simple-minded, unreflective, or impervious to criticism (provided it is conducive to the basic project of course) as much of the critical commentary tends to imply. For that reason it is illuminating to compare cases, not in the spirit of some positivist fetishism, but simply to illustrate the range of strategies, policies and debates that may be in play. Ghana

and Sierra Leone are two relatively small West African countries (Ghana is about the size of Britain, Sierra Leone about the size of Scotland), both once British colonies, both once regarded as very promising candidates for independence. Both have suffered political turbulence in the form of coups and repression but whereas since 1992 Ghana has been politically stable Sierra Leone experienced vicious internal conflict between 1991 and 2002.

Engineering civil society in Ghana

Ghana has had substantial engagement with western donors for a long period of time, and donors are heavily involved in almost all aspects of Ghana's social, economic and political life. The 'promotion' of civil society in Ghana as part of a strategy to improve governance has been a long-standing part of the overall strategy of western donors. In 2000 the then World Bank country director in Ghana said that the two main benefits of greater civil society involvement were the generation of feedback to help the public sector improve its performance and the improved accountability of government (Harrold 2000). The 2010 Ghana growth strategy said that 'the role of civil society as key stakeholders/partners in the development process is very crucial to achieving transparency and accountability' (GoG 2010: 123). In at least some respects Ghana does have a vibrant associational life. It has been estimated that there are 1000-3000 registered NGOs with a combined development expenditure of \$150-200m (Danquah 2011). In addition there are lots more informal associations, such as self-help and hometown associations and church-based organisations. Despite this the Bank argued that 'participation by civil society in the management of public affairs has been constrained by the lack of access to information', and the recent Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda has argued that there is 'low participation of civil society in governance' (World Bank 2004a: 21; GoG 2010: 122).

Part of the donor strategy has been to encourage NGOs to play a more significant role. For example, the Public Financial Management Project was focused on improving the central government's budget management and revenue collection processes, but it also had as one of its objectives the strengthening of 'civil society' involvement in the area of economic management (World Bank 2000: 3-4). This involved support for organizations within the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (a 'civil society' organization), funding for a variety of initiatives to encourage the participation of civil society in the oversight of economic management, including providing training for the media so it can 'play its watchdog role vis-à-vis the fiscal and economic activities of the government' (World Bank 2000: 4). We can also see this with a recent multi-donor funding mechanism to support civil society groups. STAR-Ghana (Strengthening Transparency, Accountability and Responsiveness) funded NGOs and civil society organisations operating in a number of areas, including the oil and gas industry, education, and supporting the 2012 election, with the aim of 'improving the accountability and responsiveness of Ghana's government, traditional authorities and the private sector' (STAR-Ghana 2012).

Ambiguities over the character of accountability, however, are revealed in other projects and programmes. The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy document says that 'groups for consultation were selected based on their ability to build broad legitimacy for the GPRS. The groups were seen as partners whose support was felt to be necessary for the implementation of the GPRS' (GoG 2003:5). In other words, groups that were thought to be important for its implementation (see also Kothari 2001). This is echoed elsewhere. An ODI report on DfID funding for civil society has said that 'non-traditional' civil society includes groups such as grassroots organisations, faith-based organisations, diasporas, the media and private-sector associations [are important for] ... securing genuine, domestically-rooted support for a given

policy direction (ODI 2007: 28). The 2010 growth strategy says that ‘the deepening of the process of promoting participation of stakeholders ... in the design and implementation of the national development agenda is an effective mechanism for promoting and consolidating broad national ownership. ... Accordingly, the broad objective of policy will be to seek to promote and strengthen national ownership and achieve national consensus to ensure policy sustainability’ (GoG 2010: 128). It is hard to avoid the conclusion, not that Western donors do not really ‘want’ participation of civil society groups, but that such participation is designed to elicit the consent of certain kinds of groups to a development strategy that is significantly determined by the donors.³ In this way the ‘public interest’ (as understood by the donors) is guaranteed not by the participation of civil society groups, but by the broader pattern of donor influence on development policy. As Harrison has put it, ‘intervention is not exercised solely through conditionality and adjustment, but to a significant degree through closer involvement in state institutions and the employment of incentive finance’ (Harrison 2004: 77).

Some indication of what kinds of groups western donors consider to be ‘civil society’ is given by the kinds of organizations that ‘participated’ in the PRSP process. This ‘participatory’ process had a number of elements. The process started with a national forum of stakeholders involved in poverty reduction activities including the government, NGOs, civil society and advocacy groups and donors. There then followed a more extensive consultative process involving 36 community groups, the Ghanaian media, the Trades Union Congress, student unions, professional bodies, representatives of women’s groups, NGOs and religious groups involved in service delivery, the Ghana Employers Association, research institutions, political parties and members of parliament (GoG 2003: 5-10). It is clear from this document that the kinds of groups understood as being ones who can ‘participate’ are

mostly ones organised around certain ‘interests’. In this sense the participatory process clearly operates with a particular view of what constitutes ‘civil society’ that excludes groups organised along different lines. The STAR-Ghana programme is not just about engineering accountability, by channeling funding to specific areas considered by the donors to be priorities (such as the oil and gas sector), but also evidences an attempt to engineer civil society itself. In particular, the STAR-Ghana funding programme has gender equality and social inclusion as core criteria for funding. Only those groups who have this as a stated aim will be allocated funding (STAR-Ghana 2012).

This concern with engineering civil society is evident in a series of projects the World Bank has undertaken that in one way or another are attempting to reduce and/or rework the role of Traditional Authorities – the collection of Chiefs, Queens, Priests and other traditional authority figures whose role predates colonial rule and which still maintain considerable power and legitimacy in Ghana, particularly in rural areas (and one of the aims of STAR-Ghana is to improve the ‘accountability and responsiveness’ of these traditional authorities). The relationship between these authorities and the state in Ghana has often been fraught, particularly in the immediate post-colonial period (Rathbone 2000). The 1992 Constitution protects Traditional Authorities but explicitly bars them from participating in party politics. The World Bank’s General Counsel expressed a series of reservation about traditional legal systems. While he accepted that these systems ‘help meet a fundamental need for justice’, he argued they had a number of problems. These include that fact that judgments are rarely recorded in writing and therefore can be ‘inconsistent and unpredictable’ and make appeal difficult; that customary laws ‘can be discriminatory against women, children and vulnerable minorities;’ and that the ‘training of officials of traditional tribunals in elements of procedure and human rights’ may be necessary to improve the fairness of customary law processes

(Danino 2005). In 2003 the World Bank funded a Land Administration Project (World Bank 2003). One element of the project supported the revision of laws and regulations regarding land ownership and administration. This was seen as particularly important precisely because there are a variety of different types of land tenure systems in Ghana, some tribal, clan, or family based often overseen by Traditional Authorities, some commercial, and some held by the state (see Kasanga and Kotey 2001). One expected outcome of this project is the development of a more efficient land market, which would 'instill order and discipline to curb the incidence of land encroachment, unapproved development schemes, illegal land sales, and land racketeering' (World Bank 2003: 6).

A second Land Administration Project was developed to deal with the weakness and lack of transparency in the customary land tenure system. This project funded the establishment of customary land secretariats that will establish 'minimum norms of transparency, respect for rights and quality control in documentation and record keeping' (World Bank 2011a: 9-10). The Bank also funded a Promoting Partnerships with Traditional Authorities Project that ran from 2003-2006 (World Bank 2007a). In some respects it was a straightforward 'capacity building' project with various training programmes and workshops, and the provision of training to improve the financial and management 'skills' of Traditional Authorities. But the project also provided support for a review of traditional laws and the role of traditional courts and review the need to codify and revise customary law (it is notable that this element of the project comes under the heading of 'preserving cultural heritage'). As the World Bank has said, 'traditional authorities will be supported to assume a constructive role in national development and the modern nation-state, in particular in local land and judicial administration as well as in extra-judicial dispute settlement in conformity to the requirements of rule-of-law and national policies'. (World Bank 2007: 31)

Such social engineering is not limited to elites and reworking existing forms of association. Quite explicitly donors are constructing new social groups. Two Community Water and Sanitation Projects emphasized the provision of water and sanitation services to communities who were willing to contribute towards the capital costs and the operations and maintenance costs of water and sanitation facilities (World Bank 1994b; World Bank 2005). Recipient communities had to demonstrate that they could effectively operate, maintain and repair water facilities, collect revenue, keep records and accounts, and evaluate and resolve problems (World Bank 1994b: 38, 81). Communities were then expected to contribute 5-10% of the capital costs of the project, and levy and collect tariffs to pay for operations and maintenance (World Bank 1994:22-8; World Bank 2005). The idea of developing community organizations is also visible in the Community Based Rural Development Project (World Bank 2004b). In this case the project supports the development of rural infrastructure and the rehabilitation of community facilities, alongside capacity building for community based organizations (World Bank 2004b: 4-5). These organizations were given training in management, small enterprise development, 'group dynamics', planning, budgeting, record-keeping, and managing bank accounts (World Bank 2004b: 36).

More recently the World Bank has developed a project that has as its central aim the development of social groups. This project, Building the Capacity of the Urban Poor for Inclusive Urban Development in Ghana, has as its aim 'to strengthen the capacity of communities to actively engage in constructive, results-oriented public community dialogue'. It targets slum dwellers in Greater Accra. But this project is not providing the conditions for these groups to articulate their views, but rather about making groups in the first place. It is designed to mobilize communities to actively participate by establishing savings groups. In

order to do this, local ‘leaders’ will be identified, and they will be given training in order to effectively ‘lead’ these newly created groups. They will be trained how to undertake ‘effective engagement’ with local government officials and other stakeholders (World Bank 2011b).

Donor engagements with civil society in the Ghanaian case illustrate all the ambiguities and tensions we noted earlier. Civil society is important for ensuring accountability and improving the performance of the government. But, there are limits to the forms of accountability exercised by civil society, there is a clear understanding about the need to encourage certain attitudes and rework certain forms of association life such that they embody and pursue liberal norms (equality, transparency, rights). Finally, it is clear that the donors are building civil society, from the ground up, by encouraging the creation of certain kinds of groups, organized around certain kinds of economic and political engagements.

Engineering civil society in Sierra Leone

For all sorts of reasons the civil society project in Sierra Leone has been more problematic than in Ghana largely due to a much greater degree of instability and violence. During the 1960s and 1970s the state was massively informalised, political activity of any kind was circumscribed, and economic decline, exacerbated by corruption and smuggling, was almost continual. This situation precipitated an uprising by the Revolutionary United Front, noted for its highly destructive tactics, which resulted in a decade-long and immensely damaging internal war. The end of that war in 2002 saw very extensive involvement by the ‘international community’ in the country which was also characterised by new modalities, for example, formal agreements as to expected policy and institutional changes, and long term aid commitments, with an unusually high concentration of resources on ‘governance’ issues.

Civil society issues have been posed on the terrain of ‘peace building’, a combination of terminating conflict, re-establishing order and creating the conditions that will prevent a return to conflict (Paris 2010). But the peace building agenda both signifies greater ambition on the part of outside agencies and also commits them, to deeper analytic engagement with, and to deeper intrusions into, target societies.

Despite these very different circumstances, donor documents for Sierra Leone also stress the involvement of civil society in recent developments in the country, hailing for example its role in bringing about peace and stability. Support for civil society is embedded in specific programmes such as the Integrated Public Financial Management Reform Project as well as a whole series of decentralization projects (World Bank JAS and World Bank PRSP). In these and other documents consultation with ‘civil society organisations’ is constantly emphasised. The desirability of making public participation a major feature of the post-war recovery process has been stressed by the Sierra Leone government itself as well as international donors and was inscribed in the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP) (GoSL, 2001) and later the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) of 2005–2007 (GoSL, 2005), as well as other documents notably the Sierra Leone Vision 2025 (GoSL, 2003), which noted that, ‘another critical political challenge is putting in place sound state governance systems that allow for popular participation and social inclusion, accountability, efficiency, as well as building capacity to manage the development process’ (2003: p. 34). Yet despite the (it must be said, rather bland and formulaic) rhetoric of these documents, projects and programmes, on closer analysis even they (and certainly many others) exhibit all the ambiguities and tensions about civil society earlier identified.

It is clear that the room for debate about the ‘public interest’ is substantially constrained, if

not exhaustively defined, by the donors and international organisations. The drafting of Sierra Leone's PRSP in 2004 involved a fairly extensive process of consultation and the participation of civil society organisations in the process was coordinated by an international NGO, ActionAid Sierra Leone with financial support from DFID. But the main conduit for support for Sierra Leone civil society has been the (rather bizarrely named) ENCISS (Enhancing the Interface between Civil Society and The State to Improve Poor People's Lives), an organisation largely funded by DFID whose stated purpose is 'to increase the capacity of civil societies to participate in, influence, contribute to and monitor the Poverty Reduction Strategy' (ENCISS 2009: ix). In effect civil society comprises organisations which accept the premises and content of the PRSP, a document not noticeably different from many other such documents. It is generally agreed that there has been extremely little parliamentary oversight or engagement in the PRSP process in Sierra Leone and that much of its content derives from the agendas of donors. As one Sierra Leonean Government official suggested, '[t]he World Bank had targets in their country strategy, and we incorporated these into the PRSP strategy. At that time there was no MDBS (Multi-donor budget support), but the European Commission had a number of targets, and we incorporated those too' (EURODAD 2008: 16).

Nonetheless within these rather strict parameters the donors have not been insensitive to local circumstances especially concerning relations between state institutions and the wider society. Perhaps the major issue confronting post-conflict Sierra Leone was how far dysfunctional local institutions, notably rural chieftaincy had caused the conflict and, if so, what should be done about it. Whatever misgivings there were about the chiefs the imperatives of restoring order led DFID to fund a Paramount Chiefs Restoration Programme to reestablish basic administration and to signal to the population that it was safe to return to

their villages. At the same time DFID was mindful of the dangers of abuse of powers by chiefs (there was after all a long colonial history of this) and organized consultation meetings for local people as well as issuing a revised code of conduct for chiefs and their employees. Since then the debate has rumbled on, both in academic publications and policy circles, about the legitimacy and utility of chieftaincy, one view asserting that the roots of the conflict lay in a broken patron-clientelist system in which chiefs increasingly used their 'traditional' power illegitimately to extort labour and other resources from young men, and interpreting the conflict as 'a long deferred revolt of the rural under-class welled up, led by intransigent youth' (Richards 2005: 588). On this analysis if the conflict is not to recur, the old chieftaincy system must ultimately disappear. A rather different view has suggested that much of the oppressive picture is no longer plausible, but that the institution of chieftaincy remains rooted in daily life and still retains considerable popular approval. On this account 'the fundamental challenge,' would then be, 'to make chieftaincy relevant in Sierra Leone in the 21st Century' (Fanthorpe 2009).

Such considerations informed the promotion of an alternative model of local governance rooted in the idea of the decentralization of government powers to Local Councils (Zhou 2009). Under strong donor pressure and with support from the UNDP and the World Bank a new Local Government Act created a structure of district councils responsible for providing a wide range of services, devolved from central government, while the chiefdoms continued to perform other essential local functions, notably the administration of customary land rights, revenue collection and the maintenance of local law and order. The councils were dependent for their revenues either on transfers from the centre or on taxes collected by the chiefdoms. The Local Government legislation was ambiguous about the relationship between the Councils and the Chiefs and for reformers this presented the danger that the Councils would

become dependent on either the central state or the chiefs. Such institutions require of course the presence of modern civil society as conventionally understood and such groups attracted funding from the donors as part of the strategy.

It might be suggested that the international engagement with Sierra Leone, in the particular circumstances of the country and especially with the overwhelming need to restore basic state functions, has generated not one but two sets of discourses and policies about civil society. On the one hand there is a (more or less reluctant) acceptance of the existence of traditional groups and attendant modes of administration and forms of law enforcement. This can be seen in the tolerance of the chieftaincy system but also in a much more analytically open stance to what actually exists on the ground. World Bank studies, for example, openly acknowledge the conceptual difficulties in applying notions like civil society to much of Sierra Leone, and deploy such labels as 'traditional' civil society and 'formal' civil society and are not unaware that these categories are not water tight (World Bank 2007b). In the same vein the Bank has placed considerable emphasis on investigating what modes of rule and dispute resolution people actually use (World Bank 2006b).

A second stream of debate and policy concerns civil society more conventionally understood and especially its ability to hold the state 'accountable'. Here there is considerable skepticism. Report after report suggests that, 'it is clear from interviews carried out that local CSOs tend to be weak. Many will only participate in activities for which they are sponsored or paid. Lack of an organized community oversight role could weaken transparency and accountability within Councils' or that, 'while it [ENCISS] has had some success conducting public opinion surveys, producing databases on local development activity, hosting workshops and radio discussion programs and resolving local disputes between citizen

groups, it has yet to develop a broader strategy for state-society engagement', indeed that ENCISS' own staff concede that, 'there is little organised civil society that is not donor driven' (Oxford Policy management 2007; International Crisis Group 2008: 13, 15). There is a constant lament as to the weakness of civil society and the need to reshape it to more adequately carry out its role. No-one knows better than external donors how dependent civil society is on outside funding. In Sierra Leone the CIVICUS survey found that, 'it is clear in the research findings that CSOs are overwhelmingly reliant on donor support for implementing their various programmes (CIVICUS n.d.: 5). As these examples suggest 'accountability' requires not merely a vibrant civil society and an open responsive government but the right kind of relationship between them. They have to see each other as it were and this mutual visibility does not simply emerge on the ground but has to be laboriously constructed.

Such profound engagement with the internal fabric of other societies poses the question of the degree to which liberal states may interfere in other states to bring about the right kind of civil society. This is by no means restricted to Africa (and has been an essential part of the construction of liberal capitalism everywhere) but the issues are perhaps particularly stark in contemporary Africa. At its simplest this involves continuing to sponsor 'modern' civil society groupings while also exploring what kinds of arrangements can be made with 'traditional' forms to draw them into the development process. It is clear from the participation of religious and faith-based groups in the PRSP process, for example, that Western donors are not operating with a strict secular-liberal account of 'civil society' in either Ghana or Sierra Leone. On the other hand there are limits to the extent to which Western agencies are prepared to tolerate divergence from their own understandings of what are appropriate (liberal) social institutions. Traditional Authorities are not seen as 'bad' per

se; indeed they are seen as being potentially important in the delivery of social services. Rather, where the social practices of these Authorities diverges from certain liberal understandings (legal norms, land markets) they are to be reformed.

In both streams there appears to be a kind of two-pronged strategy on the one hand to inculcate good (liberal) practices and on the other to at least gradually eliminate bad (illiberal) practices. It is hardly controversial to suggest that in many African countries the conduct of many civil society organisations is characterized by authoritarianism, lack of transparency and so on. As the NGO Civicus noted in a recent workshop in Freetown, 'CIVICUS' Civil Society Index (CSI) findings show that there have been high levels of financial mismanagement within civil society organisations, as well as weak internal governance and gender equity. Action must be taken to improve public trust and the credibility of the NGO sector.⁴ Effectively the elites of civil society organisations must be trained to conduct themselves properly.

This leaves a considerable field for bad attitudes and practices. In Sierra Leone 'the levels of social tolerance, particularly towards people living with HIV/AIDS, homosexuals and people of a different race remain low' (CIVICUS n.d.: 9). Much of the policy literature, despite its often emollient tone, makes it clear that these are in many ways pathological societies which simply need to be fundamentally transformed. It is here that the notion of 'civil society' is stretched to breaking point. Part of the Civicus survey comprises a 'sub-dimension [which] defines the extent to which the existing socio-cultural norms and attitudes are favourable or detrimental for civil society' (50). Here civil society ceases to have any connection with a particular society and becomes rather a template against which any such society is to be measured. But even in the 'real world' there is a sense in which civil society is quite literally

to be created. It is a constant refrain in the literature on Sierra Leone that women and youth must be empowered or emancipated with the constant (though usually unstated) assumption that this will be done by outside forces. It is clear also that the role of civil society is not to reflect the wider society but to inform and reshape it though this also is rarely made explicit. 'CSOs educate the public on the environment, human rights, gender equality, good governance – accountability and transparency, corruption, decentralisation, poverty eradication or alleviation, respectively' (CIVICUS n.d.: 77).

The patent absurdity of this sort of utilisation of 'civil society' in large part explains the fairly rapid disillusionment with the concept in more academic writing about Africa, which though it struggles to anticipate, track, indeed inform the demands of liberal states and agencies, is under some obligation to observe social realities and to demonstrate at least a degree of attachment to coherent reasoning. There was informed scepticism from early on (Kasfir 1998) and then a growing tide of findings that suggested that African civil society not only had weak links to the populations it supposedly represented, little internal democracy and remained subordinate to Western agencies and their agendas, but in many ways was positively dysfunctional in its tendencies to create new forms of inequality, promoting clientelism and corruption amongst leaders, and even weakening the capacity for collective action (Booth 2010).⁵ At the risk of simplifying a complex picture liberal social science found that what was actually there it did not like and what it would like was not there.

Conclusion: Civil Society and the Liberal Project in Africa

These rather general arguments would clearly benefit from further elaboration in a number of directions. One we have already explored a little ourselves namely the obvious historical parallels between the contemporary and the colonial periods (Williams and Young 2009).

The study of the latter has tended to be dominated by perspectives that see colonialism as almost entirely deviant from the liberal tradition and which have endlessly obscured the degree to which colonial rule was committed to projects of social change that were never reducible to oppression and exploitation. The crucial difference is of course that colonial rulers, however constrained by the limits of 'hegemony on a shoestring' (Berry 1993), did have some local means of enforcement whereas the modern armies of progress and development are perforce constrained to promote social change 'at a distance'. That difference acknowledged however, one aspect of colonial rule, the divisions between officials of different types and backgrounds, as well as the tensions between them and missionary endeavour and capitalist enterprise, points in another direction as yet poorly understood with a strong contemporary resonance. This would involve exploring not only the agendas of modernisation (the high politics as it were) but the gaps between organizations, between policy and outcomes, between politics and 'development', between states and NGOs as a way towards a more nuanced understanding of the 'liberal project' in the twenty-first century.

A second though linked area, worthy of further scrutiny, is the degree to which, and in response to what factors, the priorities and practices of western donors shift over time, and the effects of such changes on civil society support programmes. In Ghana, for example, it is clear that western donors are very animated about the potential impact of significance oil and gas revenues on Ghanaian politics (unsurprisingly given experiences elsewhere in Africa). As the STAR-Ghana programmes shows, civil society organisations are understood to play a part in ensuring transparency in this area, but it is also clear that donors are attempting to bind the Ghanaian state in other ways too. This is evident in the raft of projects targeting the budgeting and spending mechanisms of the state, and the capacity of the relevant government departments. It is also evident in attempts to commit the state to participation in international

regimes, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the anti-money laundering regimes. This suggests that while civil society is an important part of the liberal project in Ghana, donors are flexible and adaptive when it comes to the best mechanisms for ensuring the instantiation of liberal ends and practices.

In Sierra Leone also donors (and their academic advisers) have not been slow to consider other strategies. One follows from the idea that donors should engage in further manipulation of the institutional architectures they have largely set up, and intervene, for example, in the structure of relations between central and local government. As one of the leading advocates of this approach has it, ‘the World Bank should re-focus its activities in a way to direct far more resources directly to the L[ocal] C[ouncil]s. The basic aim of this is not just to make LCs better resourced and to allow them to provide services properly, but also to empower them’ (Robinson 2010). The thinking here is that strengthening local government may provide a counter balance to central government and particularly the tendency towards the centralisation of resources. This would also connect with a development of ‘modern’ civil society strategy at the local level. Elsewhere the same author has suggested that beyond resources, outside agencies need to take account of political realities, of the interests of elites and individual politicians, and seek to create ‘incentives’ for such individuals to continue to support reform processes (Robinson 2008).

Such ideas appear more bluntly in responses from expatriate advisers and officials ‘on the ground’ who often argue that critical to the success of their projects is the support of ‘key individuals’ to drive through reforms, policies and directives.⁶ Successes in the Sierra Leone Ministries of Finance and Health were attributed to having a small number of committed individuals, perhaps as few as five, in key positions. Often, but not always, the individuals

concerned were returning highly qualified and experienced Sierra Leoneans from the Diaspora on augmented salaries or seconded international staff and most often a combination of the two. More than one respondent suggested that the ultimate key individual is President Koroma himself. The situation was sometimes characterised as ‘lighthouse politics: when the president shone his light on a policy, it began to work. The job of the donors was to regulate the light. Alternatively when Sierra Leonean politics is actively focused on elections, for example, it was widely conceded, that the reform process would tread water as other factors, regional, ethnic, and party political come into play.

However bluntly expressed, what might be called this ‘man-on-the-spot’ realism now appears to be receiving acknowledgement in more theoretically sophisticated forums. In recent years there seems to have been a greater recognition that donor strategies in Africa have been rather too driven by a commitment to instantiating liberal ends and arrangements in Africa. Some considerable doubt, if not complete loss of faith, has been cast on civil society strategies, even within the World Bank. There is much more talk about the necessity of paying attention to local contexts, of ‘going with the grain’ of African societies, and thinking about what kind of governance would be ‘good enough’ (Bunse and Verena 2012; Kelsall 2008; 2011; Grindle 2007; 2011). In the light of a more general reassessment of donor strategies, it has been argued that the ‘better governance that Africa needs is not so easily identified with the usual concept of ‘good governance’ (Booth 2012: 2; for a more general reassessment see Lin 2012). There is little doubt that a more rigorous and informed analysis of the actual modes of governance and forms of associational life in African states would be an important step in developing more nuanced strategies. The question this poses for the major donors, however, is whether and to what extent they are prepared to substantially modify their liberal understandings of governance and civil society in future aid policies. As long as they do not,

then the kinds of ambiguities and tensions we have identified will continue to characterise western agencies pursuit of a liberal project in Africa.

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End notes

¹ This chapter is an expanded and revised version of an article published as David Williams and Tom Young, 'Civil Society and the Liberal Project in Ghana and Sierra Leone', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 6, 1 (2012), pp. 7-22.

² See the subtle discussion in Taylor 1995: chaps 11 and 13.

³ It is wrong to think of the Ghanaian government as passive in this process, but rather than being committed to the participatory process as a way of developing a better development strategy, it has been argued that the government saw the process as a necessary one to gain debt relief under the HIPIC initiative and mobilize additional donor funds (Whitfield 2010)

⁴ See <http://civilsocietyindex.wordpress.com/2010/10/29/cso-accountability-workshop-in-sierra-leone/>, accessed 27 September 2011.

⁵ For sceptical commentary more broadly see Encarnación 2006.

⁶ This section draws on research recently embarked on by Tom Young and Dr. David Harris of Bradford University